



DHEC's Office of Solid Waste Reduction and Recycling

For Your Information...

Garbage 101

Let's talk trash. One of the things that we probably do every day is throw away garbage. The act is so common that it doesn't even register. We've all heard the cliché: "Out of sight, out of mind." Well, even when garbage is in sight, it seemingly passes under our eyes virtually unnoticed. But it's there. Then it's gone.

How much garbage do we make?

That question is not as simple to answer as it would seem. Just think of all the different sources - or generators - of garbage. You make garbage, right? And your family makes garbage. And schools, businesses, organizations and industry make garbage. Everybody makes garbage. And everybody makes different kinds of garbage.

While it's hard to determine with precision how much garbage is being made, it can be measured. In South Carolina, county governments send an annual report to the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) that includes how much garbage its residents generate and what happens to it - whether it is recycled or disposed of in a landfill or in an incinerator. DHEC also receives reports from municipal solid waste (MSW) landfills and incinerators.

Before reading any further, here's a term you need to know. What you call trash or garbage, professionals call *solid waste*. There are different kinds of solid waste, but one type measured nationwide by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA) and in South Carolina is MSW.

What is *MSW*? It's the combined residential, commercial and institutional waste generated that includes but is not limited to paper, cans, food scraps, yard waste and packaging. It does not include, for example, any industrial waste. That's an important distinction. Why? Well, some experts say industry accounts for about 40 percent of the total waste generated.

And the number is ...

So, how much MSW did we make? South Carolinians generated more than 4.39 million tons of MSW in fiscal year (FY) 2002 (July 1, 2001 - June 30, 2002) according to the S.C. Solid Waste Management Annual Report for FY 2002. How do we compare nationally? The amount of MSW generated in (calendar year) 2000 (the latest numbers available) nationwide was 231.9 million tons, according to the U.S. EPA.

How much MSW do we generate for disposal every day? South Carolinians generated 4.2 pounds of MSW per person per day in FY 2001. By comparison, nationwide Americans generated for disposal 4.5 pounds per MSW per person per day in 2000 according to the U.S. EPA.

Where does the garbage (MSW) go?

Of the 4.39 million tons of MSW generated in South Carolina in FY 2002, more than 1.26 million tons or about 28.7 percent of the state's total MSW stream was recycled. Of the remaining amount, 2.92 million tons of MSW or about 66.5 percent was disposed of in the state's 18 MSW landfills while 208,626 tons or about 4.8 percent was sent to the state's only MSW incinerator, which is located in Charleston County.

How do we compare nationally? The amount of MSW recycled nationwide in 2000 was about 69.9 million tons or about 30 percent of the nation's total MSW stream. In addition, about 128.3 million tons or about 55 percent of the nation's total MSW generated was disposed of in landfills while about 33.7 million tons or about 15 percent was sent to incinerators.

There are other places garbage may go before being disposed of in a landfill, sent to an incinerator or recycled. Some garbage is taken to a **transfer station** where it is compacted and loaded on large trailers. This is done usually when the community is a long distance from a landfill. Some garbage is taken

to a *materials recovery facility* (MRF and pronounced “Murf”) where recyclables are sorted from the garbage. The recyclables are taken to companies who process the materials and make them into new products while the garbage goes to a MSW landfill or MSW incinerator.

How does the garbage get to where it’s going?

Usually, it is taken by a garbage truck. But garbage can be moved by barge and by rail.

What’s in our garbage?

The U.S. EPA calculates – by weight – what makes up the nation’s MSW stream. In 2000, of the total MSW generated *before* recycling, paper and paperboard (which includes office paper, newspaper and cardboard boxes) was the largest category, comprising 37.4 percent or 86.7 million tons. Yard waste was second (12 percent or 27.7 million tons) followed by food scraps (11.2 percent or 25.9 million tons), plastics (10.7 percent or 24.7 million tons) and metals (including aluminum cans and steel cans – 7.8 percent or 18 million tons). Rubber, leather and textiles (6.7 percent or 15.7 million tons), wood (5.5 percent or 12.7 million tons) and glass (5.5 percent or 12.7 million tons) rounded out the top eight categories.

South Carolina measures the total MSW generated and how much was recycled, but not the total amount of a specific waste. To roughly figure out what specific category of material is being thrown away in South Carolina, we can use the national percentages determined by the U.S. EPA. There were 4.39 million tons of MSW generated *before* recycling in South Carolina in FY 2002. That means that by using the

U.S. EPA’s figure of 37.4 percent of the total MSW generated being paper and paperboard products, South Carolinians generated an estimated 1.64 million tons of paper and paperboard products in its MSW waste stream. Remember, it’s only an estimate, but the numbers can be used as a guide.

Other estimates of what we generated before recycling in South Carolina include yard trimmings (526,800 tons), food waste (491,680 tons) plastics (469,730 tons) metals (342,420 tons) and glass (241,450 tons). Again, these are estimates based on the U.S. EPA’s national averages.

Think before you throw...

Of all the environmental issues we face, garbage is one we can do something about. The choices we make everyday affect not only the amount but also the type of waste we throw away.

You know the three Rs. Waste reduction, which is making less garbage in the first place, is the most preferred option of waste management. Reduction is followed by reuse, which means repairing items, donating them to a charity or selling them. Reuse is followed by recycling and composting, which is the process of turning materials that otherwise would become a waste into valuable new resources.

Disposing of garbage at a landfill or burning it at an incinerator should be the last option for waste management. To learn more about garbage and ways you can reduce the amount you generate at home, at school, or at work, or more about recycling, composting and buying recycled, visit DHEC’s Office of Solid Waste Reduction and Recycling Web site at www.scdhec.gov/recycle or call **1-800-768-7348**.



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